

Schools Are Tracking Your Child's Mental Health—Whether You Like It or Not

A worrying trend is emerging in schools across the country. With increasing regularity, school districts are tracking students' mental health and raising flags if a screening shows something amiss.

Student mental health tracking is often framed in terms of safety or prevention, arguing that all kids should be screened to identify the few who could potentially serve as a danger to themselves or others. Last week, NPR reported that in Florida all students who registered for public school this fall were required to disclose their mental health history. Has the child ever seen a therapist? That information must be revealed as a condition of school registration.

This mental health tracking measure is part of the response to the mass school shooting in Parkland, Texas last February that left 17 people dead. The high school where the shooting took place instituted heightened safety measures this school year, including 52 new security cameras, automatically locking classroom doors, and more armed guards.

Some of these enhanced security measures, as well as the mental health history disclosure, are not at the discretion of individual schools or districts. They are now Florida law. Troubled by the Parkland shooting, state lawmakers recently passed legislation requiring more armed guards at public schools and mandating mental health disclosures on public school registration forms. The new Florida statute spotlights the willingness of many citizens to give up personal liberty in exchange for an increase in perceived government security.

According to the NPR article, the Florida law is particularly concerning to parents with special needs children. One mom with a young child on the autism spectrum told NPR: "If you do say, 'Yes, my child has seen a counselor or a therapist or a psychologist,' what does the school then do with that?"

Florida may be the most recent example of public schools monitoring students' mental health, but the practice is widespread—and often surreptitious. A Wall Street Journal article written last year by a New Hampshire physician blew the lid on secret school screening of mental health. In her article, Dr. Aida Cerundolo writes: "Educators and administrators increasingly are using psychological screening tools to identify children who are at risk for social and emotional issues, and to assess programs geared toward improving social and emotional skills."

Many of these screening tests are administered to schoolchildren without the parents'

knowledge or consent. Dr. Cerundolo suggests that the intent of these screenings may be well-meaning in terms of helping struggling students receive necessary mental health services, but the negative impact on privacy is large. She asks: "What is the privacy cost to students who are not at risk for a psychological imbalance, yet whose mental-health information is being documented by teachers and tracked over time?"

Whether it's security cameras and armed guards, or psychological screening, mass schooling is becoming increasingly prison-like. It's no wonder, then, that there is now a quiet exodus from mass schooling, as more parents seek to take back control of their children's education. Rather than tolerating invasive privacy breaches and state intrusion on personal matters, many parents are opting-out of government schooling in favor of homeschooling and other private school options. As schools continue to erode individual freedoms, parents will continue to walk away.